

OBSERVATIONS
UPON
THE INSTINCT OF ANIMALS.

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BY

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OBSERVATIONS,

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THE instinct of animals is well defined by Paley, he calls it a propensity previous to experience, and independent of instruction. I should confine this property, with which all animals are endued, in a greater or lesser degree, within much narrower limits, than those that are generally assigned to it.

It extends, I think, to little more than to what is absolutely necessary for the preservation of the animal itself, and for the procreation of the species.

But there are very extraordinary propensities in animals, that extend far beyond these limits. They are very different in different species, but are always admirably adapted to their respective wants, to the places that they are to inhabit, to their means of subsistence, and to their security from those dangers, to which each species is more particularly

exposed. It would be useless to enumerate instances of these extraordinary properties that are so well known, and that are, and ever must be, objects of our highest admiration.

The propensities that induce every species of the brute creation, always to employ the means that are best adapted to the ends that are to be attained, and that never lead to the errors, to which the boasted reason of man is so subject, cannot be the result of experience, or of instruction, because they are as apparent in the young at a very early age, as in the older animals. They are, therefore, called instinctive, and appear to come under Paley's definition of that term.

But if these propensities were analogous to what Sir James Smith calls instinct in plants, in obedience to which, they perform certain functions according to their different kinds, the same instinct would, as in plants, be constant, and inherent, in all animals of the same species.

It may be seen that this is not the case, by comparing the propensities of animals in their natural state, with those of the same species, that have been long subjected to artificial treatment, under the management of man.

Domestic animals will be found not only to have lost many of the propensities, that seem to be characteristic of their species, but to have acquired others, that are never seen in the same species in its natural state. These propensities cannot therefore be instinctive, neither can they be the result of experience, or of instruction, because they are found in animals that are too young to have been influenced by either. They must then be attributed to some other cause.

That the wild, and the domestic ducks are of the same species, there can be no doubt, because they will breed together, and do not produce hybrids. The same may be said of the wild, and domestic rabbit, of the stock dove, and the tame pigeon, of the wild turkey of America, and of the common breed of Europe, of the house cat, and the mountain cat of Scotland. Yet nothing can be more different than the propensities of the wild, and tame breeds, of these several species.

If the eggs of the wild duck be hatched by a hen, although the young ones will, from the first, show signs of wildness, that are never seen in the domestic breed, they may, if pinioned, be made apparently tame, but if suddenly alarmed, or if

removed to a strange place, their natural wildness will show itself.

I bred a duck from a wild mallard, and a female of the domestic breed, it appeared to be perfectly tame, as long as it remained at the place where it was bred; but upon being taken to the residence of a friend, to whom I gave it, it flew away. It frequently alighted upon the ponds in the neighbourhood, and many attempts were made to shoot it, but so completely had it adopted the habits of its paternal relations, that it would suffer no one to approach it within gun-shot; and yet this duck was only half of the wild breed.

There is always a great difference in the habits of the wild and domestic ducks, although they may have been hatched, and brought up together. The former always pair; the latter are polygamous; the former, if left to themselves, will pass the night on the water, even if it be covered with ice, and it is difficult to drive them into a place of safety for the night, where the latter will go every evening of their own accord.

It is not easy to breed with more than one pair of wild ducks on the same pond, for they will be always fighting until there remains but one pair.

This is exactly what takes place with almost all wild animals. Even those that are gregarious in the winter, will, in the spring, when they have selected some particular spot for breeding, drive away all intruders, or be driven away themselves by those that are stronger than they are. But for this, too many would congregate at the same place, and food would become scarce. Yet this is not instinctive, because the domestic breeds of the same species, whose wants have, through many generations, been regularly supplied by man, will breed together in considerable numbers, as do tame ducks, and all other domestic animals. I have taken stock-doves from the nest when very young, and brought them up by hand, they became so tame, as to alight on the head and shoulders of the person that fed them, but were frightened at the least noise, and although always confined in a loft, with pigeons that were remarkably tame, became at last almost as wild as if they had been just caught in the woods.

It is said that the birds found on islands, or on rocks that have not been frequented by man, will suffer themselves to be taken, without attempting to

escape. If this be so, the fear of man that is universal in the birds of inhabited countries, cannot be instinctive, and it cannot result from experience, because it is strongly marked in the young ones, even before they leave the nest.

The domestic rabbit is, perhaps, more easily tamed than any other animal, excepting the dog; it is generally kept in a hutch, where it is not often visited, and seldom handled, and yet it is always tame. The wild rabbit, on the contrary, is by far the most *untameable* animal that I know, and I have had most of the British mammalia in my possession. I have, when a boy, taken the young ones from the nest, and endeavoured to tame them, but never could succeed. It was the very great difference that I observed in the disposition and habits of these two varieties of the same species, that first led me to turn my attention to the subject of this paper. I know but little of the wild cats of Scotland from my own experience, never having been able to get a young one of that breed, but I have seen enough of them to be convinced that they could not be domesticated, unless by being bred for many years in a state of confinement.

I had a puppy of the wild breed of Australia ; the mother was pregnant when caught, and the puppy was born in the ship that brought her over.

This animal was so like a wolf, not only in its appearance, but in all its habits and propensities, that at first I doubted if it really was a dog, but this was afterwards proved by experiment.

Of all the propensities of the brute creation, the well known attachment of the dog to man is, perhaps, the most remarkable, arising, I conceive, from his having been for so many years his constant companion, and the object of his care. That this propensity is not instinctive is proved, by its not having existed even in the slightest degree in my Australian.

I kept him for about a year almost always in my room ; I fed him myself, and took every means that I could think of to reclaim him, but with no effect ; he was insensible to caresses, and never appeared to distinguish me from any other person. I never could induce him to follow me, even from one room to another, nor would he come to me when I called him, unless tempted by the offer of food. I have seen both wolves and foxes much more sociable than he was. He appeared to be in good spirits, but always kept aloof from my other dogs.

He was what would be called tame, for an animal in a menagerie, that is he was not shy, but would allow strangers to handle him, and never attempted to bite. If he was led near sheep or poultry, he became quite furious, from his desire to attack them.

It appears, therefore, that the propensities that are the most marked, and the most constant in every breed of domestic dogs, are not to be found in animals of the same species in their natural state, or even in their young, although subjected to the same treatment as that of the domestic dog, from the moment of their birth.

Perhaps the strongest proof, that what is commonly called instinct in animals, is not implanted in them by nature, is that very different propensities are found in the various breeds of domestic dogs, and that they are always such as are particularly suited to the purposes to which each of these breeds has long been, and is still applied.

The performances of the shepherd's dog, which would seem to be the result of little less than human intelligence, are much too artificial, and too much in opposition to the nature of the animal, to be attributed to instinct, and yet the young dogs of this breed appear to have a propensity to the per-

formance of these services, or, as the shepherds say, *a thorough-bred one will take to them naturally.*

I do not believe that the same things could be taught to dogs of other breeds, such as the hound, the greyhound, or the pointer, by the most skilful training.

The true pointer will often stand at game the very first time that he finds it. The hound will follow his game by the scent, with a degree of steadiness and perseverance that is never to be found in any other breed. Hounds keep together, or *pack*, as it is technically called; terriers and spaniels will hunt a scent, but not like hounds; and it is not possible to make them *pack* by any training.

Fox hounds and harriers, even when taken out for the first time, have a very different mode of hunting; the fox hound will press forward, and cast wide; the harrier will keep to, or, as sportsmen say, *stick* to the scent, and cast back.

It is well known to all sportsmen that these different modes of hunting are essential to the successful pursuit of the fox and of the hare.

Most young hounds will hunt partridges or pheasants, but they will almost always leave it off if slightly corrected, but the pointer, who is of a

breed that has been long used for the pursuit of the feathered game, although severely chastised every time that he finds partridges (and this is often done daily to young dogs for many successive weeks, with the intention of making them point), will continue to hunt them with the same eagerness as at first.

The terrier (a breed that is now almost extinct in England), will be very much excited by the scent of a pole-cat, or of any of the animals commonly called *vermin*; but this scent will not produce the same effect upon dogs of any other breed.

I was told by a man in Hampshire, who was in the practice of finding truffles with dogs, that it was essential to procure those that were of a good breed, or, as I should say, whose family had long been used to find this vegetable.

There are many breeds of water dogs; they are very different from each other, and vary in size and in appearance, from the large Newfoundland dog to the little poodle. But there is one propensity that is common to them all, they will *fetch and carry* or bring the game to their masters with very little or no teaching. This property may be considered as peculiar to the water dog, although it may be found

in some few individuals of other breeds ; but it would require a great deal of time, and some skill, to teach it to hounds, greyhounds, and other dogs.

It is obvious that a water dog that will not bring the game to his master, is absolutely useless, therefore to teach him to perform this essential service must have been at all times the first object in his education.

No one can suppose that nature has given to these several varieties of the same species such very different instinctive propensities, and that each of these breeds should possess those that are best fitted for the uses to which they are respectively applied.

It seems more probable that these breeds having been long treated as they now are, and applied to the same uses, should have acquired habits by experience and instruction, which in course of time have become hereditary.

From these observations, and from many others that might perhaps not be intelligible to those who have not attended to the habits of the brute creation, I am led to conclude, that by far the greater part of the propensities that are generally supposed to be instinctive, are not implanted in animals by nature, but that they are the result of long experience,

acquired and accumulated through many generations, so as in the course of time to assume the character of instinct.

How far these observations may apply to the human race I do not pretend to say; I cannot, however, but think that part of what is called national character may, in some degree, be influenced by what I have endeavoured to prove, namely, that acquired habits become hereditary.

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